

## GODFATHER OF CHICANO THEATER

Luis Valdez, prolific creator of 'Zoot Suit' and 'La Bamba,' urges young Chicanos to take up his torch

BY BLANCA ESTHELA CASTAÑEDA GARCÍA

**P**laywrights often joke that they worry an unhappy theater audience might throw tomatoes. Luis Valdez worried about being shot at. America's pioneering Chicano playwright and filmmaker said gunplay was not the only thing that made his early work with the United Farm Workers dangerous. His intended audience often watched his 15-minute *actos* in 100 degree heat, sun stroked, thirsty, hungry, scared and tired. Gun toting landowners and the local police they had in their pockets were a near-constant menace.

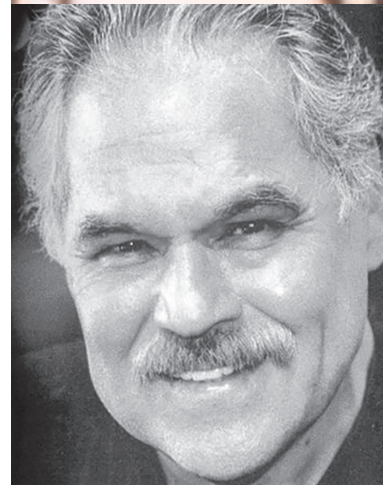
"That's why *actos* were so short," he said with a chortle. Valdez paid a visit to Southwestern College recently to meet with theatre arts students and social justice activists. The Peabody Award-winning and Golden Globe nominated writer, director, actor and university professor formed El Teatro Campesino (the farmworker's theater) in 1965 to support the work of UFW leaders Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta. He and a small cast of 2-4 actors would roll flatbed trucks up the edge of farms in the Central Valley and perform *Actos*, short one-act plays. He had learned street theatre during his time with the revolutionary San Francisco Mime Company and took it from the bustling sidewalks of The City to dusty off roads near out backs like Delano, Del Rey and San Juan Batista.

Actors taught the farm workers that they had the right to water, decent housing, breaks and school for their children. They also had the right to put their money in a bank.

El Teatro Campesino also performed in towns and cities to teach the broader population about the abuse and deprivation of the hard-working, long-suffering laborers who harvested their food. Sometimes Teatro Campesino used real *campesinos* as actors. That was challenging.

"I just had to get people on their feet to begin to improvise their own reality," he said. "Rather than impose something, we encouraged people to speak for themselves. That became really important and continues to be a

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**'ANOTHER WAY TO SAY MEXICAN'**—Valdez created the edgy character El Pachuco as the simmering inner voice of conflicted U.S. Navy recruit Henry Reyna in 'Zoot Suit,' the first Chicano play performed on Broadway. The film version was a hit, leading to the massively popular movie, 'La Bamba,' the tragic story of Ritchie Valens, the first Chicano rock star.

